Images That Transform:

Analyzing Visual Culture That Changes People's Minds[1]

Kerry Freedman

Northern Illinois University, ABD

kfreedman@niu.edu

Abstract

Images are becoming pervasive on local and global levels. Through advertising, video games, fine art, television, movies, and other forms of imagery, viewers may now encounter more information through visual sources than they do through written texts. Not only do people have more access to imagery now than in the past; they see greater numbers of images with increasing sophistication and complexity. And yet, the educational possibilities of visual culture are used at only a fraction of their potential in school.

Keywords: Fine arts, Visual culture, Curriculum, Visual culture curriculum

---

Many of the images viewers today encounter have the power to change people's minds. In part, images can change minds because they are highly didactic; they function in ways that teach by representing, illustrating, and suggesting meaning. But, as well as enlighten, images can seduce, persuade, and mislead. In the early modern era, fine art and then photography, were assumed to be powerful because they were fundamentally true. This is no longer the case. Now, it is important for viewers to understand that part of the power of imagery, especially photographic imagery, is its capacity *to appear* to represent the truth even when carefully selected, framed, composed, and manipulated. As a result, people should be able to consciously interpret both easily understood intentions and deep, subtle, and constructed meanings when viewing images.

Because images are pervasive and powerful, they have the capacity to transform students' ideas, beliefs, and identities. This may be positive, but it also can have a dangerous effect if, for example, images stereotype, manipulate, or deprecate. As a result, students need to be taught how to analyze and criticize the range of visual sources. Most students will not become artists or designers, but they will continue to be viewers, so we must prepare them to understand the often, profound impact of visual images. Because images have an influence on what and how learning occurs inside and outside of school, an education in visual culture analysis may be even more important for young people now than in the past.

Teaching Visual Culture as a Foundation for Art Education

The amount and ways students view and learn from images, which make up much of visual culture, require a concerted response from professional educators. New educational theory and practice is needed if educators are to tap the potential of visual

learning. The most recent curriculum theory in art education is based on the idea of teaching visual culture, which involves approaches to art education that include the forms, concepts, and skills of design and the range popular culture as well as fine art. Teaching visual culture emphasizes the following principles of instruction (Freedman, 2003):

1. Social Perspectives

2. Interactive Cognition

3. Democratic Education

4. Cultural Identity

5. The Range of Visual Culture Forms

6. Contextualized Form

7. Constructive Critique

To teach visual culture means to critically address sociocultural issues and embrace the cognitive processes and interests of students that motivate learning so that they can become better prepared to create, analyze and use imagery in transformative ways. Traditional curriculum goals may not motivate students to engage in learning or prepare them to be cultural and personal transformers. Student motivations to learn are often found in a complex, psychosocial and interdisciplinary matrix of interests connected to visual culture.

The Complexity of Visual Culture Image Analysis

Visual culture analysis requires multiple levels of information and interpretation. To teach visual culture involves teaching images in the contexts of both production and viewing (Freedman, 2003). That is, students must have an opportunity to understand the context in which an image was made, its intended purpose, the identity of its creator, and

so on. But, it also must be contextualized in terms of viewing and how meanings of the image have changed and how it has been used since its creation. It is at this point of understanding the relationship between intention and interpretation that analysis is often needed.

The formal or visual qualities of a professionally created image are usually chosen to support its meaning, so to study the visual qualities without understanding intended interpretation and use would be to neglect foundational information that is critical to analysis. For example, postmodern imagery is particularly complex, in part, as a result of recent technological developments and requires some understanding of the media used in order to accomplish a comprehensive analysis. The image may be intended for mass distribution to convince large numbers of people to think or act a particular way. Postmodern visual culture often suggests multiple and sub-textual meanings, so a formal analysis or a simple emotional response to surface meaning may not be the best response and may actually hurt an attempt to analyze the piece as a whole.

So, the analysis of any particular image studied must be both broad and deep. The following is a list of concepts that may be used in lessons to focus and broaden image analysis.

Visual Culture Concepts to Aid Analysis (Freedman, 2003)

1.   Art as Cultural Production

        -reflections of cultural conditions

        -cultural critique

        -cultural symbols

        -challenges to the elitism of high modernism

2.   Temporal and Spatial Flux

-environmentalism

-pastiche

-eclecticism

-recycling and transforming

3.   A Concern for "Otherness"

-issues of power/knowledge

-pluralism

-popular culture

-questioning the notion of "good" aesthetics and

"good" design

4.   Acceptance of Conceptual Conflict

-fragmentation

-dissonant beauty

-collage

-deconstruction

5.   Multiple "Readings"

-visual/textual interpretation

-issues of representation

-attached meanings

-double-coding

Conclusion

The world is full of images created to change people minds. The concepts, skills, media, and contexts through which these images are created must be part of any good art education so that students come to know how to make their own mark on the world and adequately critique images made by others. A visual culture approach to art education provides the tools necessary for curriculum development and enactment that will prepare students for the contemporary world of images.

Reference

Freedman, K. (2003). Teaching visual culture: Curriculum, aesthetics and the social life of art. New York, NY: Teacher College Press.